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Usual care of panic disorder with or without agoraphobia in general practice

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Background & Aim: In Germany the 12-months-prevalence of panic disorder with or without agoraphobia (PD/A) is about 2%, with 82% of patients being exclusively treated by general practitioners (GPs). The quality of usual (i.e. routine) care for patients with PD/A in general practice is widely unexplored. The aim of our study was to describe usual care from a GP's point of view.

Method: We designed a questionnaire for the retrospective assessment of diagnostics, interventions and referrals of patients with PD/A in primary care, in consideration of expert interviews and clinical guidelines. In the "PARADISE"-study (Current Controlled Trials: ISRCTN64669297), 38 GPs were trained on clinical guidelines within a 2-hour workshop, provided usual care to 189 patients with PD/A, and answered the questionnaire after an interventional phase of 6 months. Descriptive statistical analysis was performed.

Results: The questionnaire response rate was 36/38 (95%). Anxiety-specific diagnostics were characterized by inferior use of validated tools like structured interviews (18%), questionnaires (14%), or specific rating scales (8%). Interventions most often comprised the exploration of psychosocial problems (83%), the recommendation not to avoid anxiety-provoking stimuli (72%), and the prescription of Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (61%) or Tricyclic Antidepressants (18%). Most common reasons for referrals to specialists were psychiatric comorbidity (personality disorder 80%, depression 77%, substance use disorder 68%) and treatment-refractory anxiety (77%).

Conclusions: GP-delivered usual care for patients with PD/A was mostly well-aligned to current clinical guidelines as it involved a mix of psychosocial and pharmacological interventions. Characteristics of GPs were comparable to representative German samples. However, the generalizability of findings may be limited, given that GPs had been trained on clinical guidelines prior to the delivery of usual care.